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ABSTRACT

This study examined three elements of the mother-child relationship that have been found to influence cognitive development: (1) the child's security of attachment to the mother; (2) the sensitivity of the mother to her child's cues; and (3) maternal work status during the child's first year of life. Considered are the relationship of each of these elements to symbolic play, and the way in which all three variables relate to the child's symbolic play when the variables are used as a multivariate model. Symbolic play was assessed in the contexts of stressful and nonstressful play episodes. Results indicate that child's security of attachment and maternal sensitivity both independently influence a child's symbolic play level in the stressful episodes but not in the nonstressful episodes. When all three variables are examined together, a more complete picture of factors that influence a child's symbolic play emerges. The findings indicate that the interpersonal relationship does not affect the child's cognitive competency. The mother-child relationship influences the child's abilities to use external assistance appropriately and to explore in the face of frustration: abilities which affect the child's ability to obtain the highest level of symbolic play. Implications for further research with older children are considered. (Author/GLR)

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP ON THE EMERGENCE OF SYMPOLIC PLAY

BY CAREN BARUCH

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ABSTRACT

In this study of forty two mother-child dyads, three elements of the mother-child relationship that have been found to influence cognitive development were examined: child's security of attachment to his/her mother, maternal sensitivity of the mother to her child's cues, and maternal work status during the child's first year of life. First, the relationship each element of the mother-child relationship independently had on symbolic play was examined. Second, how all three variables when used as a multivariate model related to child's symbolic play. Symbolic play was assessed in two contexts: nonstressful and stressful free play episodes. The results indicate that (1) child's security of attachment and maternal sensitivity both independently influence a child's symbolic play level in the stressful free play episodes but not in the nonstressful free play episode and (2) when all three variables are looked at together a more complete picture of what influences a child's symbolic play emerges. Based on the results of this study it appears that the interpersonal relationship does not affect the child's cognitive competency per se but rather that the mother-child relationship influences the child's ability to utilize external assistance appropriately and to explore in the face of frustration which in turn, affects a child's ability to obtain his/her highest level of symbolic play. Further research needs to be done that examines the influence of maternal sensitivity and security of attachment of older children to see if the cumulative effect of an inability to utilize external assistance appropriately and to explore in the face of frustration has any long term effects on actual cognitive skills

INTRODUCTION

The second year of life marks a major change in a child's cognitive abilities. To assess a two year old's emerging cognitive skills, several researchers have studied a child's structural level of play (Piaget, 1962; Sinclair,1970). These authors suggest that a child's growing competency is expressed in play, so by studying this aspect, one can assess a child's cognitive abilities.

Piaget (1962), Belsky and Most (1984), and Nicolich (1977) among others, have shown that children progress through the structural levels of play in a distinct order. Over the first three years of life, children's play progresses from simple manipulation to functional to symbolic. Although sequential, individual differences exist in the age at which children attain their highest level of symbolic play. What causes these differences has been a source of controversy.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978; Bretherton, 1985) and psychoanalytical observational research (Slade, 1986) suggest that the early social and emotional relationship between mother and child affects the emergence of symbolic play. Other researchers (Main, 1973; Scarr-Salapetek, 1976) suggest that cognitive functioning in infancy is only minimally susceptible to environmental influence and thus not affected by the quality of the mother-child relationship.

AIMS

This study examines the influence that the early mother-child relationship has on individual differences in toddlers' play. Three elements of the mother-child relationship in 42 dyads were examined: child's security of attachment to his/her mother, maternal sensitivity to her child's cues, and maternal work status during the child's first year. Symbolic play was assessed in two contexts: nonstressful premodeling and stressful postmodeling free play episodes.

HYPOTHESES

*Both security of attachment and maternal sensitivity will be positively related to symbolic play.

*Maternal employment will be negatively related to level of symbolic play.

*Children will be more unfocused in the episodes following the modeling than in the episodes preceeding the modeling because of the potentially disorganizing effect of the modeling.

*Each variable will be predictive of symbolic play even when the effects of the others are controlled for; so by examining all three predictor variables together, a clearer and more complete picture of what influences a child's ability to play at his/her highest level of play will emerge.

SAMPLE

Subjects were forty two toddlers (half boys and half girls) and their mothers who participated in a Barnard College toddler developmental play group in an urban university setting. The subjects were mostly from white, middle to upper-middle class backgrounds. The present sample includes all mothers who responded to the work status questionnaire and had also been coded for the appropriate attachment and maternal sensitivity variables prior to the study.

PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

Subjects were evaluated in two paradigms: a modified Strange Situation and a Birthday Assessment. Each toddler and his/her mother were involved in the Strange Situation when the child was between twelve and twenty four months of age. An attachment code and maternal sensitivity code were used to code video tapes of the modified Strange Situation. Subjects participated in the Birthday Assessment on their second birthday. The Birthday Assessment ranged from zero to twelve months after the Strange Situation paradigm. Belsky, Garduque, and Hrncir's symbolic play code (1984) was used to code symbolic play. A parent questionnaire was employed to find out how many hours the primary caretaker worked in the first year of her child's life.

STRANGE SITUATION PARADIGM

To assess security of attachment and maternal sensitivity a modified version of Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation was employed.

***ATTACHMENT CODE**- (Aber and Baker, in press; Baker, 1989) was developed to measure the attachment relationship over the course of the entire paradigm. Each child received a score on four continuous variables: secure communication, flexible attention deployment strategy, separation insecurity, and reunion rejection. In this study only secure communication was used as an index of security of attachment. The score received on secure communication was a composite of the child's use of his/her mother as a secure base, child's positive affect towards the mother, and communication with the mother across a distance.

***MATERNAL SENSITIVITY CODE**- The Crittenden CARE (Child Adult Relationship Experimental) Index was used to assess maternal sensitivity. The index rates maternal interaction in seven domains: expression of affection, vocal and facial expression, position and body contact, pacing of turns, control and choice of activity. The ratings in these domains are used to rate mothers as having sensitive, controlling, or unresponsive styles.

BIRTHDAY ASSESSMENT PARADIGM

This assessment consists of seven episodes: a party, the first free play, the first modeling, the second free play, the second modeling, the third free play, the giving of the present, and debriefing. Throughout the entire assessment the mother, child, and experimenter are in the room. The episode before the modeling is considered the nonstressful play episode while the two episodes following the modeling are the stressful play episodes. The modeling induces stress in the children because they feel compelled to replicate what the modeler demonstrates, yet are aware that they can not meet the standard of exact replication (Kagan,1982; Aber, 1984). This is because this replication (double substitution) requires a level of symbolic play that is beyond most toddlers' ability to generate.

***SYMBOLIC PLAY CODE**-This code measured the child's highest level of symbolic play in the three free play episodes. The code consists of fourteen stages which go from simple manipulation to functional relational to pretend play. To determine the child's highest level of play, coders recorded the level of play demonstrated by the child for each twenty second interval. At the end of each of the three episodes, the play examiner made an evaluation of the child's highest level of play.

WORK STATUS QUESTIONNAIRE

*WORK STATUS MEASURE- Each parent completed a questionnaire which asked them to list the average number of hours per week that they worked during the first three years of the child's life. For this study only the information on the mother's work status during the child's first year of life was looked at.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Results of the study support the contention that toddler's security of attachment and mother's sensitivity to her toddler's cues influence the level of child's symbolic play.

*Child's security of attachment (r=.47), and maternal sensitivity (r=.47) both independently influence a child's symbolic play level in the stressful free play episodes but not in the nonstressful.

*No negative effect was found of the mother working during the child's first year of life when maternal sensitivity and security of attachment were controlled for.

*Children were more unfocused in the episodes following the modelling (episodes 2 and 3) than before the modeling (episode 1). The mean amount of intervals children spent unfocused in episode 1 (m=1.7, st. dev.=3.2) was less as compared to episode 2 (m=4.3, st. dev.=4.0) and episode 3 (m=5.9, st. dev.=4.9).

*In the post modeling episodes when security of attachment, maternal sensitivity, and maternal work status were used as a multivariate model to predict play, 41 percent of the variance could be accounted for.

TABLE 1

Maternal Sensitivity, Security of Attachment, and Maternal Work Status as Predictors of Highest Level of Play during the NONSTRESSFUL PREMODELING EPISODE in a Stepwise Regression Model

Predictor	R	R^2	ΔR^2
MATERNAL SENSITIVITY	.20	.04	.04
SECURITY OF ATTACHMENT	.21	.04	-.01
WORK STATUS	.21	.04	.00

TABLE 2

Maternal Sensitivity, Security of Attachment, and Maternal Work Status as Predictors of Highest Level of Play during the STRESSFUL POSTMODELING EPISODE in a Stepwise Regression Model

Predictor	R	R^2	ΔR^2
MATERNAL SENSITIVITY	.48	.23**	.23
SECURITY OF ATTACHMENT	.60	.36**	.13
WORK STATUS	.64	.41	.05

**p<.01 ***p<.001

DISCUSSION

The mother-child relationship influenced a child's level of play only during the stressful postmodeling play episodes. It is in the stressful situation that the children need their parents to be available and responsive to their cues in order for them to achieve their highest level of play. Those children who have a secure relationship with their mothers and a mother who is sensitive to their cues will be able to apply themselves fully to their environment and get the support which will enable them to deploy their highest cognitive skills. Those children who don't have a positive relationship with their mother will spend more time being concerned about the world surrounding them so that they are less able to engage in cognitively sophisticated play. In the premodeling free play episode the aspect of motivation is not being tested but in the post modeling episodes, children need to be motivated to reach their fullest potential. It is in the episode that tests motivation that the mother-child relationship will highly influence the child's cognitive skills.

There has been a lot of controversy as to whether environmental factors such as the mother-child relationship influence cognitive development. Although some researchers (Matas, Arend, and Sroufe,1978; Slade,1986; Belsky et. a, 1984) have found a relationship between the mother-child relationship, others (Main,1973; Scarr-Salapetek, 1976) have not. Those researchers who have found a relationship, have found a relationship between the mother-child's relationship and motivational aspects of symbolic play. Slade (1987) found that secure children were more persistent in their explorations of the environment and more likely than insecurely attached children to perform at the higher end of their abilities. Like Slade, Belsky et al. (1984) also found a relationship between security of attachment and motivation to play at the child's highest level of play. Those researchers who have found no relationship between security of attachment and maternal sensitivity to symbolic play may have measured cognitive competence per se rather than the tendency or motivation to deploy cognitively sophisticated skills.

The findings in this study provide ample support that child's security of attachment to his/her mother and maternal sensitivity to her child's cues greatly influence a child's ability to obtain his/her highest level of symbolic play in the face of stress. At two years of age, the mother-child relationship might not seem to affect cognitive skills per se, but the cumulative impact of not applying oneself fully to the environment, could lead to eventual

cognitive limitations. Further research is needed to examine the influence of security of attachment and maternal sensitivity of older children. This is necessary to assess the cumulative effect of an inability to explore in the face of frustration.